

By KIM SCHMIDT *Hub Staff Writer*
GRAND ISLAND

SANDY RUHTER BELIEVES IN MIRACLES.

Monday, she saw one firsthand as her 38-year-old daughter was acknowledged for more than one year of sobriety from her 27-year methamphetamine addiction.

"I remember when she only weighed 100 pounds and had track marks all over her body," Ruhter said of the condition of her daughter, Dee Clinebell of Kearney, just two years ago.

But thanks to the Central Nebraska Drug Court, Clinebell has begun to turn her life around. Clinebell wept in front of a crowd of about 100 Monday in Grand Island as she thanked those for helping her stay sober.

"I was looking at 30 years in prison or drug court. So I thought, 'What the hell, I'll try drug court,'" Clinebell said. In and out of jail numerous times for various drug and alcohol related offenses, Clinebell was one of 11 drug court participants to graduate from the intensive 18-month program.

In addition to Clinebell, Josie Wood and Justin Tatum of Kearney also graduated. Wood was the first participant in the program in Adams, Buffalo, Hall and Phelps counties. Hall and Adams counties each had four graduates.

Offered to users as an alternative, the program aims at putting chronic drug users under a law enforcement microscope to make sure the offender doesn't revert to drugs and crime. The court started in March 2002 and is not for drug abusers with a violent history or those who deal in large quantities.

When felony drug charges are filed against a user, he or she is first required to plead guilty to the charge, be convicted and then be put in the program. If users complete the program, the guilty plea is withdrawn and the charges are dismissed. Participants must abide by several conditions, including maintaining employment and sobriety, passing random testing, attending counseling, and drug treatment. Unsuccessful users are sentenced on their original charge. About five people haven't completed the program.

The program costs \$2,500 with the participant paying half the cost. There are 70 participants from four counties. A drug user since she was 12, Clinebell had been arrested 15 times since 1995, including on drug, alcohol and theft charges. On Aug. 26, 2002, she entered the drug court and has been drug free since.

"Low and behold, it (drug court) gave me my life back. It taught me how to live again, and it gave me a soul inside," she said.

"Without this program, I know I would be dead somewhere."

Because of her extensive record, it took drug court officials three weeks to decide to accept Clinebell into the program. Drug Court Coordinator Connie Hultine of Grand Island said the staff accepted Clinebell knowing that if the program had any weaknesses, she would find them.

"I couldn't make it one day without using," Clinebell said. "I've lost everything more than once."

But Hultine said officials haven't had any problems with Clinebell, Buffalo County Sheriff Lt. Duane Bond said police had given up on Clinebell. "None of us would've given her a remote chance of succeeding," he said. "I've seen her go from someone who had no regard for people or anything to someone who is a good mother to her son. It's such a contrast. It's an unbelievable story."

But each day, Clinebell said, is a struggle to not use drugs. "Some days it's hour by hour, and some days I don't think about it for a day. It just depends," she said. "Sometimes, I think to myself I'd rather go use than have to deal with this pain or deal with this." To help fight off the urge to use again, Clinebell relies on her sponsor, others in the program, and often looks at her 7-year-old son and at herself.

"It was hard. I just prayed a lot, and some days it's still hard."

Buffalo County District Court Judge John Icenogle said it will take several years to see if the program is a success. National statistics show that 70 percent of the people who enter a drug court system succeed. Now that participants have graduated, they will still have minor contact with the drug court for six more months before fully being on their own.

"Hopefully, what we've taught them is tools to find their own support groups because it's going to be a battle for the rest of their lives," he said.

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